In Search of My 'Real' Self, My Ontological 'I', and 'The Eastern Researcher' Through Journeying with Berger and Luckmann's "The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge"

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Abstract

This article is a conscious reflection of my 'Eastern' and 'Western' selves engaged in research with new immigrants in Brantford and Brant-Haldimand-Norfolk counties, a mid-sized rural/urban town in Ontario that is now experiencing unprecedented immigration. I use Berger and Luckmann's work in "The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge" to clarify my own personal and academic values. Specifically, their critical analysis of the concepts such as 'Identity', 'Socialization', 'Roles', and 'Knowledge' raises questions for me about the validity and legitimization of my knowledge claims and praxis. The authors work challenges me to probe deeper into the process of newcomer integration. In the process of this enquiry I am able to dismantle my ideology(s), both as an immigrant and as a researcher and witness the dialectic dance of identity construction between 'self' and 'society'. I witness my 'self' and the 'other' not as binary selves but as twin selves. In other words, the 'other' though a separate entity is also a reflection of myself. In solitude I embrace the jewels in the womb of both my Western formed 'I' and Eastern formed 'I'.

With my ears attuned to the text, I listened keenly to Berger and Luckmann's 'The Social Construction of Reality' (1966). At first their voices hesitantly knocked on my castle of knowledge that I had constructed with an active participation of both my Eastern formed 'I' (my first 19 years in India) and my Western formed 'I' (the last 16-years in Canada). As I continued to listen intently, Berger and Luckmann's voices collided with my past enticing a bloody war between my Eastern formed 'I' and my Western formed 'I'. My castle of knowledge collapsed to the ground. This paradoxical conflict between these two 'I''s is by no means new. In the past 16 years, I have repeatedly struggled to locate my multiple selves -- a visible minority woman, an immigrant, a survivor, a researcher -- in contemporary Canadian society. These multiple identities allow me multiple reflections from multiple points of view. "Through multiple reflections from multiple points of view I am armed with alternate discourses to define myself. But each point of view is impure" (Ronai, 1995, p. 418, 419). My effort through this article is to share with other students how my journey with Berger & Luckmann (1966), in my epistemology course, offered me an opportunity to undertake a conscious reflection of my multiple identities.

From the onset Berger and Luckmann (1966) challenged me to delve deeply into the epistemological and ontological status of several concepts that I had previously habituated into my vocabulary. As a student specializing in the 'community and policy' stream of social work, rather than 'clinical work', I engaged in brief discourses about reflexivity primarily within the domain of 'insider/outsider role', 'self/other' or during discussions on 'ethical issues'. However,

it is only after diving deeply into this text that I witnessed *the movement* of concepts such as 'Identity', 'Socialization', 'Roles', and 'Knowledge' by means of my research with the immigrant population. These words were no longer static, frozen in my memory as an intellectual concept. I understood with full bodily force -- not just theoretically -- how my perspective on these concepts shaped my work as a scholar and as a researcher. Such reflexivity helped me to clarify my own values and to reflect on the validity and legitimization of my knowledge claims and praxis.

As I stood on the ruins of my fallen castle, it became clear to me that my location in Canadian society varies depending upon the extent to which my Eastern formed 'I' and/or my Western formed 'I' can participate in the social stock of knowledge. In Berger and Luckmann's (1966) words, "Participation in the social stock of knowledge thus permits the 'location' of individuals in society and the 'handling' of them in the appropriate manner" (p. 42). Elaborating on this dialectical process, the authors imply that an individual's social location will dictate how they are "handled". This epistemological insight into the dialectic between an individual's 'social stock of knowledge' and his 'social location' is very pertinent to my research with immigrants. In my Master of Social Work (MSW) thesis, *Exploring Newcomer Settlement and Integration in Brantford and Brant-Haldimand-Norfolk counties*: *Community-based Participatory Research (CBPR)*, for example, I explored the gaps in services for newcomers to Brantford, and Brant-Haldimand-Norfolk counties. This is a mid-sized rural/urban town in Ontario that is now experiencing unprecedented immigration. I found that depending upon the immigration *status o*f the individual --refugee, landed immigrant, and so on-- his /her accessibility to government funded services varied. This finding confirmed my personal experiences. Over the fourteen years since I first arrived in Canada and finally attained my citizenship in August 2008, my immigration status went through multiple transformations - foreign student, foreign worker, non-status, landed immigrant, and Canadian citizen. These stages involved several policy areas and, depending upon my immigration status, my accessibility to government funded services varied. Each stage of settlement, dependent upon the level of personal and government support that was available to me, impacted my personal and professional integration in the host society. Based on this *professional knowledg*e and my *experiential* knowledge as a newcomer I was well aware that the *successful integration* of immigrants was contingent upon the individual's ability to access social programs and funding dollars. Nevertheless, I consider myself guilty of placing the burden of integration largely upon immigrants' shoulders; that is, in their abilities, educational and adaptation skills. Alas! Lost in my academic ambitions, I did not fully grasp a clear understanding of a complex issue of immigration integration. I will explore this issue further later in the text.

Berger and Luckmann's (1966) analysis of the relationship between 'role' and 'knowledge', 'institutions and knowledge', and the dialectic between 'objectively assigned' and 'subjectively appropriated' identity provided me with new insight into my role as a researcher researching *with* new immigrants. This insight was integral to my ontological transformation. Let me explain. These authors argue that an analysis of roles is critical in understanding the sociology of knowledge (or social construction of knowledge). Roles mediate the relationship between individual and society. Canada's knowledge-based immigration policy, for example, desires immigrants with specialized knowledge/skills that are conducive to the long-term economic growth of Canada (Finance Canada, 2006). One could argue that an immigrant's *role* will largely determine the quality of their socialization experience in a host society. For example, for a person who gains entry into Canada based on his/her professional skills that are in

demand in a particular host community, it would be easy for him/her to access society's specialized stock of knowledge. Such an individual is very likely to encounter positive socialization experiences. One such example would be of a physician who is offered a position in a hospital in Canada due to a shortage of doctors in that province. This individual may find it easier to adapt to the host community in comparison to another migrant who does not possess *Canadian employable skills.* This doctor is welcomed by the host community based on his/her skills, is most likely to be financially secure and develop friendships within the medical community. On the other hand, the 'unemployed' individual may be forced to collect social assistance. He/she could be in danger of typifications such as a *lazy immigrant* or an *immigrant draining the Canadian economy*. This individual will most likely encounter negative socialization experiences even if he/she is highly skilled and makes every effort to find a job in his/her field of expertise.

Socialization signifies a high degree of symmetry or asymmetry between subjective and objective reality (and identity) (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Since identity -- a key element of subjective reality -- is formed by a bidirectional social process between self and society, the understanding of the role of knowledge in the dialectic between identity and social structure is very important for analyzing immigrant integration. Let us imagine the abovementioned unemployed worker as a 'black' male. If the host society is not welcoming to 'black immigrants' this individual is in danger of being further marginalized due to his identity *type*. So, how does *this* new reality or identity – unemployed and black -- manifest in his consciousness? It is very likely to create an asymmetry between his subjective and objective reality. More importantly, what if the unemployed migrant's *role* carried an appendage of knowledge that was in demand and respected in his native country? How does he hold on to who he knows he 'truly' is in a new institution where he is routinely 'deskilled', 'devalued' and 'marginalized'? How does he find peace in working at survival jobs even though he knows that he is capable of much more? It is my contention that depending upon the individual's ability to subjectively detach from this 'reality' and not internalize this reality as 'his reality' it will influence the process of his identity formation. After all, "...identity is objectively defined as a location in a certain world...to be given an identity is to be assigned a specific place in the world" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 132).

Getting back to my earlier point on newcomer integration, undeniably, the access to community and social problems will impact newcomers' abilities to integrate within their host communities. However, newcomer integration is much more than one's ability to access community services or availability of culturally competent services. Referring to Butler, Watson (2002) argues: "Discourse serves as a means of social control and symbolically inscribes with meaning and significance and through this identity is maintained and sustained. There is no escape of linguistic construction" (p.510). In the knowledge-based economy, an 'unemployed' immigrant, even though highly skilled, is undesirable. His 'unemployed status' interlocked with 'immigrant status' makes him vulnerable to being branded as a 'lazy immigrant', or a 'stupid immigrant'. In this instance, it is very likely that the 'racial difference' becomes a marker of 'inferiority' and 'laziness' (Ahmed, 2002; Watson, 2002). Bannerji (1996) eloquently writes: "Expressions such as 'ethnics' and 'immigrants' and 'new Canadians' are no less problematic. They also encode the 'us' and 'them' with regard to political and social claims signifying uprootedness and the pressure of assimilation" (p.112). This process of clarification and ontological transformation provoked me to dig deeper and to try and dismantle my ideology(s), both as an immigrant and as a researcher. Berger and Luckmann (1966) illuminated the dark and

dangerous spaces of institutionalization. I am now able to see institutionalization not just as a lifeless organism but as an entity filled with human elements and boundless energy. It was with great discomfort that I acknowledged that over the last few years in particular -- as a researcher -- I was guilty of 'handling' newcomers within the Western paradigm of 'objectivity'. My experience in research has primarily been in community organizations that are grounded in Eurocentric principles. I am trained in academics in a western educational institute. At some point of my career I allowed my research activities to succumb to habituation and I became an 'institutionalized researcher'. A large part of my *self* had become identified with this institutionalized world even though I often found it oppressive. Mohanty, Russo & Torres (1991) point out that this institutionalization does not happen in isolation. I concur with these authors that as a woman of color in Canada, my epistemological lens is shaped by my social and political fabric, my colleagues, friends, professors, literature, films, and songs, among other things. Needless to say, the more I internalized the reified role of a 'researcher in a Western institute', the more I reduced the distance between my 'real self' and 'the role that I was playing'. I failed, for example, to question the taken-for-granted assumptions about immigrants who are unemployed. I did not ask, "How was the term *newcomer* constructed and, more importantly, what does this socially assigned typification mean?" What does newcomer integration *really* imply? And *who* benefits from it? This understanding further deepened my impression of activist work. I saw CBPR as a personal and professional commitment to challenge worldviews that propagate oppression and become an agent of positive change.

In solitude, I embraced the spirit of skilled newcomers who are de-skilled in Canada. Even though in the past I had refrained from weeping over the debris of their dreams, the stories of the men and women I encountered in my research had infringed upon my peace of mind. Perhaps it was because their stories mirrored my past undesirable typifications such as 'non-status immigrant', 'foreign worker', and 'maid', that I distanced myself from those stories. Indeed! I did not want to be reminded of my past just when my dream of attaining a PhD was beginning to develop deep roots in Canadian soil. After all, my *role* of a researcher gave me "an entrance into a specific sector of society's total stock of knowledge" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 77). I had become proficient at playing my 'role' and enjoying its privileges. That was the primary reason that I had never risked reflecting upon their lived realities. I wanted to run away from all the feelings that connected me to the participants. I was feeling guilty for succeeding. In the core of my being I was tired of fighting. I was feeling powerless. I found it safer to live in the paradigm of objectivity, statistical analysis, and sophisticated graphical representations of participants' realities rather than travel deeper and engage in the mind-body-emotion-spirit pedagogy that is integral to critical social work practice (Wong, 2004). I had forgotten who I was and where I came from. It took the *Other* to awaken my spirit. Finally I wept for my *self*, a newcomer who faced multiple oppressions in Canada and for the *other* – immigrants who face multiple oppressions every day. I saw my 'self' and the 'other' not as *binary* selves but as *twin* selves. In other words, the 'other' though a separate entity is also a reflection of my *self*.

Through deconstructing my multiple selves I found a glimpse of my *real self* in each of these *selves*; and acknowledged the jewels in the womb of both my Western formed 'I' and Eastern formed 'I'. In the process of this enquiry I glimpsed the deeper layers of newcomer integration and witnessed the dialectic dance of identity construction between 'self' and 'society'. This 'new' knowledge calls me to question the socially-constructed immigration documents that have historically dictated what is considered 'valuable knowledge. It places a responsibility upon me as a social worker and a researcher to challenge the immigration

discourse that reify race and legitimize its use to control immigrants. It is in dismantling my castle of knowledge that I found some clarification in the age old epistemological question, "How do I know what I know?" Discovery of self, after all is a journey and not a destination. Moving forward, I will anchor my castle in the wisdom of Mahatma Gandhi, "I want the cultures of all land to be blown about my house but I refuse to be blown off my feet by any" (Prabhu & Rao, 1960).

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